

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Statement of
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before the
FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE
of the
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
The Great Ape Conservation Act
and the Keystone Species Conservation Act
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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am Ginette Hemley, Vice President for Species Conservation at World Wildlife Fund. WWF is the largest private conservation organization working internationally to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats. We currently sponsor conservation programs in more than 100 countries, thanks to the support of 1.2 million members in the United States and more than 5 million worldwide.

Today's hearing addresses two proposed international endangered species measures, the Great Ape Conservation Act and the Keystone Species Conservation Act. Both are modeled after the highly successful African and Asian Elephant Conservation Acts and the Rhino and Tiger Conservation Act and their associated grant programs. Together, these initiatives have supported conservation projects throughout Asia and Africa and have contributed to the survival and protection of these endangered species in significant ways. In fact, the United States can share the credit for the improved status of several tiger, rhino, and elephant populations because of funding and technical assistance provided by these programs. Moreover, by supporting conservation programs for species such as these that require significant habitat expanses to survive, the U.S. also has contributed to the conservation of countless other species that share the same habitats.

The Great Ape Conservation Act, H.R. 4320

There is little question that the world's great apes--gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans--are under serious threat. The same pressures that have pushed tigers and rhinos to the verge of extinction--habitat destruction and overexploitation--have also pushed populations of the world's great apes to dangerously low levels in many places. An escalating threat, the illegal hunting of apes and other primates for the bushmeat trade, is now taking a major toll on some populations of lowland gorilla, chimpanzee, and bonobo. The WWF report, *Wanted Alive: Great Apes in the Wild*, which we provided to the subcommittee, includes current information on the status of the world's great apes, the threats they face, and recommendations for securing their long-term protection.

A general threat to the survival of the great apes, particularly in Africa, is the serious decline in the capacity of range country governments to protect these species and their critical habitats. Economic strife, civil unrest, war, and growing poverty all have contributed to a reduction in government support for wildlife protection programs in many countries. In fact, WWF research indicates that government wildlife budgets across Africa have been slashed in recent years. There is no question that international resources and funding are needed if these species are to survive.

As with the existing programs for tigers, rhinos, and elephants, there are several important features of the proposed Great Ape Conservation Act and its associated conservation fund. First, grant monies for conservation projects are critically needed for the kinds of activities outlined in the proposed legislation: securing key habitat areas, stopping illegal hunting and trade, mitigating human-wildlife conflict, broadening awareness of conservation needs, and undertaking important research to assist managers of wildlife populations and habitats. Second, by giving preference to projects for which matching funds are available, the U.S. government can be instrumental in leveraging support from other sources. The Rhino and Tiger Conservation Fund, for example, leveraged over \$2 million in matching funds and in kind contributions for the \$1.1 million in grants awarded in 1999 and 2000--a 188 percent return. Third, by focusing the limited available funding on a small number of species, the U.S. is likely to have a more measurable impact than if the support is spread over many species. Fourth, there is significant value from an education and awareness perspective in tailoring legislation to specific species. We have seen this reflected with the Rhino and Tiger and Conservation Act and in the public response to the request for increased funding. Thousands of individuals have taken the time to register their concern with Congress on this because they care about and can relate to individual species such as tigers and rhinos. This public connection is critical to the continued progress and development of these programs.

WWF strongly supports passage of the Great Ape Conservation Act, but would also like to suggest some amendments to the proposed legislation. We recommend that the definition of "conservation" be broadened to include *sustaining viable populations* of the species covered. Under the same section, we recommend that "programs for the rehabilitation of members of a species" be clarified to refer to *wild* animals, so as not to construe captive breeding or release of captive-bred animals to the wild as a conservation priority. We further recommend that *enhancing the capacity of relevant government wildlife agencies* be included as a priority conservation activity. In section 4(c)(2)(B) under Consultations, we suggest inclusion of the phrase *in a timely manner* in reference to the submission and consideration of comments from foreign governments, to allow expeditious decision making, especially in the case of conservation emergencies. In section 5(b)(2), we urge reconsideration of the amount of appropriated funds three percent allowed for administrative expenses. This amount has been insufficient to cover the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's administrative costs for the existing tiger, rhino, and elephant programs and we suggest that Congress consider increasing it. Additional administrative support could help ensure that grant monies are moved to the field more quickly than they have been in the past for some tiger, rhino and elephant projects.

In section 4(h), we appreciate the importance of placing limits on the use of funds for captive breeding. However, given the immense challenges and expenses associated with reintroduction efforts, and considering how experimental and unproven this approach remains, we do not believe that reintroduction of captive bred apes to the wild is a conservation priority at this time. We urge the subcommittee to include in report language clear guidance on this issue so that funding for critical conservation needs of wild apes is not siphoned off for captive breeding efforts that have no direct relevance to conservation.

We also recommend that the subcommittee consider adding to the Great Ape Conservation Act a

requirement that the administering agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, conduct an annual or biannual review of the grant program, including soliciting public and expert comments on conservation priorities, issues, and needs. While there is little question that the tiger, rhino and elephant grant programs have made a significant contribution to the conservation of these species, these programs might benefit from periodic formal input from outside experts and parties. We recommend that this proposal also be considered for the tiger, rhino and elephant programs when the statutes are reauthorized.

WWF also believes that any new program authorized by the Great Ape Conservation Act, as well as the existing tiger, rhino, and elephant programs, would benefit from more consistency in the standards and approaches that are applied in grant decision-making, particularly regarding scientific peer review of project proposals. The subcommittee may wish to ask the Fish and Wildlife Service for ideas on how this might be achieved.

Keystone Species Conservation Act, H.R. 3407

The proposed Keystone Species Conservation Act provides a potentially important mechanism for addressing the conservation needs of hundreds of endangered and threatened plants and animals worldwide, aside from those covered by the existing tiger, rhino and elephant legislation. We greatly appreciate the subcommittee's interest in broadening U.S. involvement in international wildlife conservation efforts, an area that is chronically in need of support by both the public and private sectors. We also appreciate the subcommittee's desire to avoid a proliferation of species-specific legislation through a possible catch-all approach. WWF supports the concept of the Keystone Species Conservation Act, but has several reservations about the current proposal.

First, as mentioned above, we believe there has been great value from an education and awareness-building perspective in the existing species-specific legislation and programs. Swift passage by Congress of the tiger, rhino, and elephant legislation was important not only to address critical conservation needs, but also for raising public and political awareness about the plight of these species. Public support is critical not only to the success of the government programs, but also to the non-government organizations who provide matching funds for the projects supported by these programs. We believe there is merit in maintaining a species-specific focus, even within the context of a broader keystone species bill. This might be done through the establishment of "mini-funds" within a larger conservation fund, perhaps by allowing the designation of appropriations for priority species or species groups within a broader keystone species fund. We urge the subcommittee to explore this possibility.

We at WWF also believe that the definition of "keystone species" needs careful consideration and review. The definition in the current proposal is so broad that it could apply to literally tens of thousands of species. While we appreciate the value of maintaining flexibility in determining species priorities, the proposed definition is the antithesis of the successful approach taken with the very focused tiger, rhino, and elephant legislation. We recommend that Congress consider narrowing the definition by applying additional scientific criteria or species status information. For example, CITES Appendix III species might be excluded altogether, as many are not considered seriously threatened. In addition, the IUCN-World Conservation Union's Red List categories for threatened species might be considered as an additional filter for setting priorities. Certain biological, ecological or other characteristics that make a species particularly vulnerable might also be taken into account. For example, heavily exploited species included on the CITES "significant trade" list might be considered a priority, because of the severe trade threat they face and because of their economic importance. Special consideration might be given to migratory species, which need habitat and resources in different regions at different times of the year, and whose conservation generally requires

multilateral cooperation. Priority might also be given to narrow-ranging endemic species, whose populations are small and confined to limited geographic areas. These are just a few suggestions about different criteria that could be applied in targeting species for support under the proposed Keystone Species Conservation Act.

Without doubt, thousands of threatened species around the world are in need of urgent conservation attention, and the proposed Keystone Species Conservation Act could assist in providing support to many of them. At the same time, because available funding is likely to be limited for any new international conservation efforts, we believe it is important to carefully consider how funding will be applied and how priorities will be set. With this in mind, WWF suggests that the subcommittee consider authorizing a panel of experts to review the proposed Keystone Species Conservation Act, its implications for international endangered species conservation efforts, the scope of the legislation and definition of species to be covered, the merits of a single versus multi-species approach, the ability of the Fish and Wildlife Service to administer such a program given current budgetary constraints, possible additional sources of future funding, and other relevant issues, before Congress takes further steps on the proposed legislation. WWF would be pleased to assist the subcommittee in such a review, as appropriate.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before the subcommittee today. Mr. Chairman, I would be happy to answer any questions.

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